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ABSTRACT

The Discussion Development Group (DDG) at Moray House College of Education, Scotland, is a resource center designed as an open learning system to provide inservice training, consultancy support, and resources on classroom discussion. A case study involving 17 teachers and recently conducted by the DDG explored features of process innovation and dissemination as they relate to the development of classroom discussion. The inservice training and consultancy support offered by DDG differs from other experiential learning programs on discussion in the emphasis it places on psychodynamic processes in discussion. The concept of imagery influences the training program methodology in the areas of image of place, image of the group, and image of leadership. Teachers participating in the program indicated that they achieved a level of process-thinking and a psychodynamic level perceived as significant. (CB)

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VALUES & COMMITMENTS UNDERLYING DISCUSSION

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT ON DISCUSSION:
Group Images in Action

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Abstract: A description of an experiential learning programme to meet teachers' needs as a model of appropriate membership and leadership roles in discussion. The use of imagery and its influence on the methodology of the programme is described and evidence from teacher transcripts discussed. It is concluded that effective discussion is the external evidence of having learned to communicate with others in a group and that the use of imagery is an indicator of discussion at its deepest level of communication.

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VALUES AND COMMITMENTS UNDERLYING DISCUSSION:
Professional Development on Discussion: group images in action

Background

The context for this contribution is a study conducted in Edinburgh, Scotland, by the Discussion Development Group (DDG) at Moray House College of Education, reported in Francis (1985) and Francis & Davidson (1987).

The DDG is a resource centre designed as an open learning system to provide in-service training, consultancy support and resources on classroom discussion. The research conducted by the DDG has its roots in the applied behavioural sciences and humanistic psychology and has much in common with "new paradigm" research as described by Reason & Rowan (1981).

The DDG has recently explored features of process innovation and dissemination as they relate to the development of classroom discussion. In particular,

- developing the role of the researcher as consultant
- building a discussion network in Scotland
- re-defining the "package" approach to the dissemination of process innovations.

The findings of the project team are presented as a series of case-studies which describe

- teachers working with teachers
- teachers working with consultancy support
- the DDG working with and within organisations.

The case-study on which this contribution is based provides evidence of the way in which an experiential learning programme met teachers' needs and modelled appropriate membership and leadership roles in discussion.

Discussion is the product of effective group interaction, the external evidence of having learned to communicate in a group. The process of learning to listen, to talk and to discuss are developmental stages in learning to communicate with others. The process of learning to communicate requires involvement with the many different communication levels which potentially exist in a group situation. The mature discussant will be able to function on any level the group chooses.

The use of imagery in a group discussion is an indicator of discussion at its deepest level of communication. It is the interface of conscious and unconscious levels of being and one individual in a group may often express for another, or group of others, a synthesis of the group experience through the use of imagery.

Discussion is at its most holistic when psychodynamic, cognitive and behavioural processes are addressed. The use of imagery is an integration of levels of feeling, thinking and acting in discussion.

Discussion in education, however, is often a denial of this holism. The teacher may label the cognitive and behavioural aspects of discussion as rational, the psychodynamic as irrational. Education in many institutions seeks to promote the rational view of humanity and to eliminate irrational perceptions. Abstract, conceptual thinking is often regarded as valid knowledge, personal experience as invalid or less valued knowledge. Discussion in class may be a discriminatory experience, teachers using their power to validate what they regard as appropriate interaction.

Teachers who hold these views experience resistance when asked to participate in the work of the DDG. They find it difficult to engage with the communication levels unfamiliar to them and may deny the validity of the task. These teachers, however, are concerned about the underlying feelings in discussion, but this concern is expressed on their students' behalf rather than their own. They resort to asking for techniques, to resolve the problems of the silent student, or the students who do not attend in discussion.

The DDG regards it as a professional obligation that teachers work through such resistance. If effective discussion group leadership is to be grounded in reality rather than rhetoric, it is essential that prospective leaders have awareness, insight and skill in managing the different psychological levels which exist in group communication.

The Training Programme

The in-service training programme and consultancy support offered by the DDG differs from other experiential learning programmes on discussion in the emphasis it places on psychodynamic processes in discussion.

It is generally accepted that cognitive and behavioural aspects of the discussion process should be addressed in training and that a multidisciplinary approach to the study of discussion is beneficial (Dillon 1987).

The DDG suggests that reflection on the psychodynamic features of discussion should also be considered and that questions about discussion need to be answered at the level of feeling as much as at the level of thinking and doing. It is this process of lifting feelings into thought and into spoken language which the DDG describes as the psychodynamic of dicussion.

Skills-orientated methodologies advocated in the 1970s have tended to influence classroom communication research. Much has been written on the analysis of behavioural competence and the design of instruments to analyse the outcome of skills training programmes. The DDG regards behavioural data as useful when it is evaluated alongside cognitive and psychodynamic data, but places the emphasis of evaluation on the notion of becoming "a reflective practitioner", as described by Schon (1983), suggesting that staff development programmes should initially focus on the ability to be reflective about the cognitive and psychodynamic aspects of teaching and learning.

Participants in DDG programmes experience the psychodynamic process through human relations training in which learning is derived from the immediate experiences of the group. The aim of the programme is to develop the "process-thinking" of the participants. DDG findings suggest that the development of process-thinking is enabled by identifying the nature of the reflective process in discussion as illustrated by the participants' use of imagery.

The Exploration of Imagery

Barthes (1986) describes the language of imagery as the 'rustle of language'. Educational researchers appear to be becoming more sensitive to the potential richness of this area of personal experiential knowledge. Smith (1981) considered the value of metaphor as a source of new methods for evaluation. Clandinin (1986) studied classroom practice perceiving a series of teacher images in action.

Group analysts have been interested in the collective image of the group over a longer period (Bennis & Shepherd 1956, Foulkes 1957, Bramley 1979). Foulkes quoted in Bramley (1979), likens the group to a 'hall of mirrors' "in which parts of ourselves are reflected and counter-reflected. We see ourselves in others and others see themselves in us".

Images which express the DDG's philosophy of group discussion include

- the class as a group ('only connect')
- the leader with the third ear
- the 'music' of the discussion process

This imagery is derived from literature (Forster 1910, Woolf 1927), from group analysis (Foulkes 1973, Bramley 1979) and from cross-cultural influences eg Chinese proverbs*. The images emerge from the personal history of the DDG consultants from their background in clinical work and communication science.

The Use of Imagery

How then does this use of imagery influence the methodology of the training programme? Three images emerge as significant

- the image of place
- the image of the group
- the image of leadership

The Image of Place

> The DDG is placed in the angle of building. It is difficult to find until the route becomes familiar. No one passes the door. Those who come to the room usually intend to be there.
>
> The room itself is designed as a resource base, the resources housed on one wall, video equipment on another. The room is dominated by a circle or orange chairs on a green carpet with long pile.

Teachers comment immediately on the comfort of the room, contrasting it with the facilities with which they are provided for discussion. As the training programme progresses they become increasingly sensitized to the symbolism of the room.

"As I left the school I saw a departmental meeting in one of the classrooms. The teachers were sitting in rows, the head of department standing in front of them. I wouldn't have noticed that before coming to the DDG".

* You tell me and I forget. You show me and I remember. I do it myself and I truly understand.

The teachers can express their anxiety about the learning programme in terms of the physical surroundings. It is suggested that the video camera might be switched on by a manipulative leader and that viewers in another room might be clandestinely observing the group process.

The carpet has been interpreted as a symbol of personal growth as it reminds group members of long grass. In the group's silent moments a teacher has commented - "it is as if we expect something to grow in the middle of the carpet". One group member laid a daffodil in the centre of the circle when he entered for the final session.

The organisation of the setting conveys non-verbally to group members the perception the leader has of the discussion task. It is intended to highlight the impression that discussion is an activity which requires enhanced listening skills, and that the aim is to reduce the impact of authority relationships by sitting in a circle so that each participant's contribution can be seen to be of equal value.

The contrast between the tranquillity of the group setting and its communication of a sense of ease, is frequently noted by those teachers who have considerable anxieties about the group process in discussion because of their awareness of the lack of ease in many Scottish classrooms. For these group members the imagery of the setting provides material for comment and reflection as the programme develops.

The Image of 'Group'

If the sense of place conveys an image of how discussion might be - democratic, open and reflective - so also does the group's size and composition. The circle of chairs is large enough to hold 10 people. When the group is smaller, the size of the circle is altered accordingly.

This is in direct contrast to class groups which may be as large as 25 students. The training programme through the medium of the group image, poses the problem of how to create a similar 'climate' in the classroom.

The training group is also a stable group in that it begins to form its dynamic in session 1 and moves through a series of stages which can be identified, before reaching the ending stage of the 10th session. The teachers are alerted to this aspect of group process as the group develops its own rhythm. They consider the fact that student groups are often unstable with different memberships for different discussions. The teachers begin to recognise the value of allowing student groups to create their own rhythm through familiarity with the communication style of group members.

The musical image of 'rhythm' becomes overt as the group experiences its own 'resonance' and group cohesiveness develops. This can be compared with the blocking moves of a departmental group demonstrating a pattern of resistance to change.

The imagery of dance and ritual emerges strongly as the similarities and differences between the group members are experienced and members group and re-group on the basis of productive and non-productive pairings in discussion.

The Image of Leadership

The role of the person regarded as 'leader' can also be explored through the use of musical imagery. Many texts on group analysis refer to the leader of group discussion as the 'conductor'. This image may be explored by group members as they discuss whether the leader is in control of all the voices. The group may query whether the tune belongs to the leader or to the group. The leader may be perceived as 'conductor' in the sense of orchestrating time and place so that group members are enabled to sing an individual melody in harmony with others. Another group might interpret 'conductor' differently in terms of a journey on a bus. The group might experience feeling 'lost' and refer to the leader as the person who knows the destination.

The intensity of the listening process required of the group leader was described by one group analyst as developing a 'third ear'. The 'third ear' attends to the psychodynamic process of the group - the music - while the other two ears attend to the cognitive and behavioural elements of the group.

It is the aim of the group leader to enable the teachers to experience 'the music' and to develop 'a third ear', as this is considered necessary for the effective management of group discussion.

The initial 15 hours of the DDG's programme provides teachers with an experience of a leader who does not initiate discussion verbally, but relies on the imagery of place and group composition to focus attention on the specialised listening skills which are required to express the sense of connectedness of the group's work.

The imagery used by Bramley (personal communication) to convey the sense of the leader's role is that of the balloon or bubble. It is as if the group members and the group leader are contained within a resilient balloon. The group tests the balloon's resilience by exploring the climate, the atmosphere of the group,

pushing out in new directions, aiming to maintain a sense of expansion within the group, avoiding contraction. The leader operates on the internal edge of this bubble, enabling the group to continue working on its task without the distraction of bringing the outside, inside.

Group analysts describe the internal edge as the 'boundary', a term which can release a flood of imagery connected with game-playing, team-work, of running with the ball or of being knocked about in a rugby scrum.

The Teachers' Response to Imagery

What has been described is the covert use of the imagery of place, community and nurturing leadership to create a group climate in which the teachers can engage with the fundamentals of group discussion.

In a review of the literature on the link between experience and image Clandinin (1986) comments:

"Images are seem as the mediator between the conscious and unconscious levels of being. What is known at the unconscious level finds expression in a person's thought and action, through a person's image. Images are seen as the source of inspiration, ideas, insight and meaning."

The teachers' response to the covert imagery of the DDG is to produce images of their own. The use of imagery in 5 groups of teachers (N=39) was studied and the following examples obtained:

<u>The scrum</u>

"It's as if we're playing a game of rugby and we're in a scrum and one person gets the ball and runs with it and scores a try."

<u>The mine</u>

M1 "I feel as if we're down a mine digging for coal - it's cold and dark and muddy, there isn't any light."

M2 "We're digging for gold - underneath there's gold."

<u>The tapestry</u>

"I see the group as a tapestry. We began and there weren't many threads in it and then we put in more and more threads, but they were random and didn't make a pattern. But now the blocks of colour are emerging and we're beginning to make sense of the pattern. The shapes have meaning."

The wall

"It's like re-decorating an old wall. You know, a wall with layers and layers of old paper and paint on it and we're peeling off the paper and chipping off the paint. It's taking a long time but we're beginning to see what's underneath."

The roof (this group member was African)

"In my village when someone builds a house everyone goes to help him put on the roof. We all stand around and hold the edge and then we lift it up together and place it on the house and then the house is finished. I think what we're doing in the group is like that."

The lake

"It's as if there's a lake and very slowly you see this hand coming up through the water in the middle - holding a sword, like the lady in the lake, but we can't quite reach what she's holding."

The book

"I feel as if I'm a yacht becalmed in the Doldrums. You know, up and down, backwards and forwards, but never really getting anywhere."

The release of imagery within a group signals the group's engagement with the psychodynamic dimension of the group experience. It is important however, that these sources of inspiration should not merely be experienced but that the nature of the reflective process should be explored further and the implications for the teachers' practice discussed. The DDG programme provides two further stages in the learning experience - a cognitive phase where teachers have the opportunity to conceptualise the group experience and a behavioural phase in which application to classroom discussion is planned and implemented.

Reflections on the DDG Programme

The participation of 17 teachers in the programme was evaluated to provide evidence of the development of understanding of the group experience. The teachers were interviewed prior to participation in the programme and on its completion by a researcher who did not otherwise meet the participants.

A review of the interview transcripts showed that statements about the programme could be categorised as school-centred comments or teacher(person)-centred comments. A typical school-centred comment might be:

"We've done lots of work on discussion in this department, but on a very ad hoc basis without much idea of structuring and forward planning."

A typical teacher(person)-centred comment:

"I learnt a tremendous amount about myself and about the process of discussion . . . I did learn as I went along that it was a long, slow process and a lot of reflective thinking too . . . "

It was hypothesized that if the course was successful in achieving its stated aims of providing learning unique to each group member and an opportunity to develop process-thinking skills, that the number of teacher(person)-centred comments would increase in the post-course interviews.

It was noted that in the pre-course interview 87% of the comments were school-centred and 13% teacher(person)-centred and that in the post course interviews 23% of the comments were school-centred and 77% teacher(person)-centred.

One year after the completion of the programme a group of six teachers who had participated in the group experience and had subsequently formed a support group, were asked to evaluate the relative significance of a selection of teacher-centred comments as an expression of the learning they felt they had derived from the group experience. Eighteen comments were presented to the teachers, characterised as follows:

(i) the statements were personal - often in the 'I' form
(ii) the statements related to feelings about learning from the group experience
(iii) the statements related in general to the work of the group rather than referring to specific incidents in the life of the group.

The teachers were asked to select 9 comments from 18 (cf Appendix) which seemed to represent most accurately their feelings about the course and to present them in a clustered configuration as a group evaluation of the course (cf diagram)

The group evaluation indicated that a level of process-thinking had been achieved by the teachers and that the psychodynamic level of the group was regarded as significant.

Summary

The values and commitments which emerge from a DDG perspective on professional development in discussion might be summarised as follows:

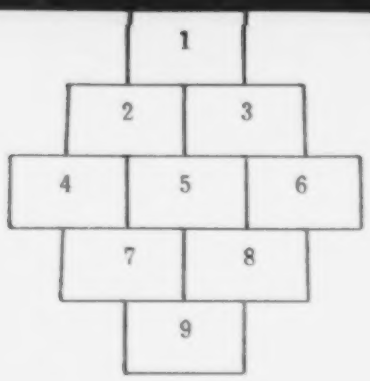
(i) a commitment to a holistic view of the discussion process incorporating cognitive, behavioural and psychodynamic elements of discussion

(ii) a commitment to personal/professional development in the human relations field. The recognition that the development of insight about group processes is an ongoing commitment in education

(iii) the value of personal, experiential knowledge. The need for teacher education to focus on the development of the reality of understanding rather than the rhetoric of conceptual thinking

(iv) value is placed on the power of imagery to inform self-analysis and a collective view of the group process in discussion

(v) value is placed on reflective practice by emphasising the development of process-thinking skills.



More important

Less important

1 I feel I have developed an awareness of what is going on in a discussion in terms of the underlying factors rather than in terms of what people say.

2 I had no real notion of how unconscious ideas affected people in a group."

3 "A new perspective for me was concerned with the meaning of 'process'; that it should apply to what goes on inside your head, not what you do or say. I suppose until the group I had completely ignored that aspect, to me process was just what people were doing and saying."

4 "I think the course has made me much more aware of how complex the whole activity is. I'm not saying that I know how to cope with the problems, but I am perhaps more aware that they are there, rather than thinking - this isn't working, try something else."

5 "I wouldn't say I was entirely clear about what I was doing now, but I know more about how things work. I think it's probably changed my attitudes to things like laughing in discussion - before I might have interpreted that as a negative sign, also the noise-level can be quite high, I realise now that this is part of group behaviour."

6 "I was also struck by the amount of time it took to get places and do things. I think before I'd be much more likely to try things once and then if they don't work give up."

7 "In terms of pupils, I feel it won't necessarily change the tasks I set, but it continues to change how I intervene. It would be like providing them with a window through which to see what is going on and what can be done about it."

8 "The group has been very successful for me in terms of personal development."

9 "I feel I've got enough background to introduce it and maybe stimulate interest in other members of staff."

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